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ABSTRACT

Supported by a rationale for activities in the language arts/English curriculum, this paper demonstrates methods of introducing students to current approaches to oral interpretation of literature. The paper argues that through planning, rehearsing, and reflecting on oral interpretations of literature, readers become increasingly aware of characters' emotions and learn to embody these emotions in performance. The paper also argues that such practice helps students in subsequent silent readings to interpret the affective dimensions of texts, and therefore to comprehend literary works. (Sixteen references and an appendix of 10 practical tips in using oral interpretation are attached.) (RS)

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THE DEEP DOUBLE GAME:

ORAL INTERPRETATION TO ENHANCE READING COMPREHENSION

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The Deep Double Game:
Oral Interpretation to Enhance Reading Comprehension

Abstract

Through planning, rehearsing, and reflecting on oral interpretations of literature, readers become increasingly aware of characters' emotions and learn to embody these emotions in performance. Such practice helps students in subsequent silent readings to interpret the affective dimensions of texts, and to therefore better comprehend literary works. Supported by a rationale for such activities in the Language Arts/English curriculum, this paper demonstrates methods of introducing students to current approaches to oral interpretation of literature.

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THE DEEP DOUBLE GAME:

ORAL INTERPRETATION TO ENHANCE READING COMPREHENSION

> The more sophisticated reader plays a deep double game with himself, one part of him is identified with a character or with several in turn while another part holds aloof to respond, interpret and judge.
>
> --Robert Penn Warren

The deep double game of Robert Penn Warren's quote sounds like one many of us would like our students to play. But the multi-level experiences of engagement and reflection sound terribly sophisticated. What about the students who don't seem to possess the skills or interest to get involved with the feelings and actions of characters, who barely seem to grow engaged with a literary work at all, much less identify with its protagonist? Or the students who manage passionate, gut-level reactions ("I think Holden Caulfield is a jerk") but seldom examine these responses? Finally, what about the student capable of a kind of rote school response to a literary work, the kind filled with pat interpretations, devoid of any real engagement at all?

The deep double game may evoke impressions of a reader more mature than we often find in our classes. Yet this "game" echoes a view of reading reported by various reading researchers and literary theorists who argue that mature readers engage in

affective transactions with texts and reflect on their reading processes. Some of these same writers suggest that schooling should address these concerns.

The concerns, of course, are even greater when we consider less sophisticated readers. For these students in particular, we need strategies that serve two functions. First, such strategies must help students grow sufficiently engaged in their encounters with literature so they explore the emotional dimensions of literary experience. Second, following the reading experience, students must reflect on their responses. While various authors have developed writing strategies to serve these ends, we propose that the oral interpretation of literature provides another especially engaging approach, one that can help students develop a repertoire of strategies ideally suited for addressing both levels of the deep double game.

Making the Affective Link

As many recent literary theorists have reminded us, reading literature is much more than a process of information gathering. The reader adopts what Rosenblatt (1978) calls the aesthetic reading stance, evoking the literary work and engaging in lived-through experience. Successful readers do not find meaning but participate actively in the creation of literary meaning. And such meaning is not purely intellectual; it is shaped by a reader's affective response (Bleich, 1976, 1978). Teachers who view student readers from such perspectives will do more than ask

students to recall details; they will seek to foster meaningful transactions between reader and text, encouraging students to explore their affective responses, to make meaning, and to reflect on these experiences.

But what specifically do we mean when we use the phrase "meaningful transactions between reader and text?" Competent readers use their own relevant background knowledge to develop ideas and sensations and imaginary worlds that are more than the sum of a text's details. When personal knowledge and textual information link, readers construct personalized interpretations. However, for many readers this process of linking what they know with words on a page is not an automatic one. Helping learners to access their background knowledge and connect it with a specific aspect of a text is one powerful way to foster meaningful literary transactions in the classroom. Because emotions and character development are key elements in the process of making the reader-text connection (Mosenthal, 1987), teaching strategies which enhance students' opportunities and abilities to explore character and emotion are needed.

As teachers we can help students to explore the emotional states of characters and to connect these feelings with their own emotional experiences. For example, a reader can learn to understand a character's actions by identifying the emotions felt upon assuming the character's role. By learning to "walk a mile in a character's shoes," the reader explores emotional connections with a literary work. The result for the reader is a

richer understanding of the literature and of the self.

Bleich (1975) has advocated the encouragement of students' emotional responses to literature. Readers, according to Bleich, need to grow sensitive to affect, to raw emotion, to how they feel as they encounter texts. Second, they need to explore associative analogies, searching for the kinds of events in their lives which have provoked the same or similar feelings. Following the lead of various reader response critics, particularly Rosenblatt, Probst (1988) has advocated that literature study begin with a similar kind of very personal written response.

But writing is not the only medium available for us to help students explore their responses. We can use the public forum of the classroom to help students rehearse and perform literature selections--and in the process, help students acquire strategies for becoming more intimate with characters in literature, strategies they can transfer to situations when they read alone, silently.

Performing the Felt level of Literature

Approaches to literary study abound today. Each theory or method of working with literature emphasizes some textual features or practices, and represses others. While some approaches might feature identification of literary forms and terms, another might emphasize personal response, and another, the history of a culture. Still others might emphasize literary

genres, political perspectives, or deconstruction. Like all other methods of literary study, oral interpretation features particular interpretive strategies, a number of which are ideally suited to helping readers explore character and the affective dimensions of literary experience.

In short, scholars of oral interpretation view a literary text not as an artifact but as something active, alive, unfolding. While students of drama embody characters who act out their conflicts before an audience, the student of oral interpretation embodies the narrator of a novel or short story or the persona of a poem, exploring how this "dramatic speaker" relates or "speaks" the drama within the literary work to an audience. In preparing a performance, a student participates in various activities that examine the dramatic situation (Geiger, 1952) and help the student identify with the speaker and the speaker's drama.

This intensified identification with speaker and character is one that researchers have found particularly powerful about oral interpretation as a method of literature study. As they read literary works aloud and rehearse them for performance, oral interpreters pay close attention to character emotions (Herndon, 1973), a speaker's motivations (HopKins, 1980), and character conflicts and emotional contours (Athanases, 1981). Oral interpretation serves the "felt level" or what Bacon (1972) calls "the felt need of poems" (p. 6). Various oral interpretation strategies can help students explore these dimensions of

character and emotion.

Key Interpretive Strategies for Performance

Just as other fields of study, such as writing and aesthetics, have moved from an emphasis on product to an emphasis on process, oral interpretation has experienced new emphasis on performance as process and not merely as final product. As language arts teachers, we have so often perpetuated the strange notion that the route to successful communication is a mystical one. Just as students frequently believe that only the highly skilled writer can produce a strong persuasive essay, or only the brightest reader can argue a "deep" literary interpretation, so do students often believe that only the most talented performers can create richly evocative performances of literature. For oral interpretation to work for all students, the process must be demystified.

In their introductory oral interpretation textbook, Performing Literature, Long and HopKins (1982) provide students and teachers with explicit strategies that treat the rehearsal and performance process in manageable slices. The text takes students through a series of workshops, featuring actual strategies all students can perform, not mystical notions of talent and great performances. A number of strategies are especially suited for work with character and emotion as students explore a text in preparation for performance.

Among these strategies are the following. The student

prepares an imaginary autobiography, fantasizing the character's history and fleshing out details to make the character more imaginatively real. Also, the student prepares a dramatic analysis, stating what is going on to whom in the "drama," (answering questions of who, what, where, when, why, how), and considering levels of characterization, such as biological, psychological, and moral.

To flesh out nuances of emotion and character motivation, the student prepares a subtext and the action of the lines for the literary selection or excerpt to be performed. In preparing subtext, the student probes the character's intentions and possible reasons for utterances, selecting the best options:

TEXT: I wonder when she'll get here.

POSSIBLE SUBTEXTS:

1 I can't wait.
2 I hope she doesn't miss the train.
3 I'm tired of waiting for her.
4 She always waltzes in like God's gift to men.

In preparing the action of the lines, the student uses present tense action verbs to determine what the speaker or character is doing with each utterance. In a sense, the student prepares a script of character changes. In the margins of the text, the student might write, for example, on a series of lines: Wonders, Asks, Worries, Hopes, Resolves. This series of activities provides a sampling of the kind of attention to character and motivation and emotion that the oral interpreter

pays while preparing a performance.

Reflecting on One's Interpretation: Deepening the Game

In her efforts to look within the mind of the reader, Brown (1980) has identified a number of the key strategies that successful readers use to make meaning from a text. Such readers tend to ask focused questions of a text, discover meaning making clues, and identify places in the text where comprehension problems have occurred. But successful readers know more than the strategies; they know when to use them and how best to apply them.

Likewise, students engaging in the act of performing pieces of literature need to develop the kinds of strategies that Brown describes. Performing is not enough: ongoing reflection on the performance process is essential. Waller, McCormick, and Fowler (1987) suggest that the reader should not merely engage in subjective response but should examine the experience of reading. They propose the following series of questions for response statements, with items two and three moving beyond response to a reflection on the response:

(1) How did you respond to the text?

(2) How did the text and you, as the reader, affect that response?

(3) What does your response tell you about yourself and your society? (p. 15)

In an effort to push students to reflect on what they learn

through the performance process, we might ask students to write or tape journal responses while they rehearse. Questions and issues such as these might be explored:

1 When you read the poem out loud, make notes of any word you say that you don't understand, even if it's a reference to a person or a place or a thing with which you are not familiar.

2 After another oral reading of the work, select a phrase or line you can't grasp and do a journal entry in which you explain what it is that seems unclear. Try to work out a possible solution.

3 After an oral reading or rehearsal of the work, write down something you don't like or don't understand about the speaker you're performing. What seems to be keeping you from understanding or liking the speaker or character?

4 After this rehearsal of the work, what do I know about any of the characters that I didn't know before?

5 Are there any feelings I noticed about the character that I didn't notice before?

6 How does the speaker of the work view him or herself? Write a relationship ad in which the speaker tries to advertise him or herself to a potential partner.

7 Something about a character I especially want to convey in my performance, and how I have attempted to do that in rehearsal.

As a follow-up, students might be asked to write a summary piece exploring how their understanding and sense about one or more characters in the literary work under study evolved through a series of rehearsals.

The Payoff For Reading Comprehension

A number of comprehension skills are likely to be influenced

by instruction in oral interpretation of literature. First, in the oral interpretation process students maintain and examine an on-going envisionment of a literary work--the mental connections they make during the act of reading. Some of these connections are causal, leading to accurate predictions about upcoming character actions. Others help establish the nuances of character relationships and motives. This information provides evidence for readers in their attempts to interpret why certain events are occurring.

Even if students don't at first grasp why characters do what they do, the acts of rehearsing and performing literature make it more difficult for the reader to ignore lines and phrases with seemingly cryptic messages. Because they have the task of speaking those lines in a convincing manner, students struggle to find meanings, become frustrated when they can't, posing questions until they develop answers (Athanases, 1981).

The close attention the oral interpreter pays to diction through having to mouth the words of the text is a key aid in the student's search for understanding why characters do things as they do. As HopKins (1980) has put it, the performer grows acutely aware of the building and movement of the story because she has to "get there" in performance. Over time, with effective practice and models, the oral interpreter learns to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information in a text and discovers ways to search for meaning making clues even during silent reading later.

In addition to experiencing this close identification with character, the student who practices oral interpretation and reflection on the process experiences the second level of Robert Penn Warren's deep double game. The oral interpreter who must return to silent reading in other situations has explored not only close identification with character, but reflections on this process of identification. An effective reader must learn to become involved in the drama within the literary work and yet maintain a conscious viewpoint as reader. This means being aware of one's own relationship to the characters even while being caught up in their drama.

In oral interpretation, performers learn to make literary works their own as they struggle to "know" characters through rehearsal, making a character's words, as one student put it, "my words." And reflective journal entries help students explore their relationship with literary works. This reader-text transaction at both cognitive and emotional levels is the kind of transaction the skilled silent reader experiences in the most reflective and empathetic moments. Oral interpretation can help students experience such moments of really thinking about a text and sensing the literary transaction, moments which also build an appreciation for the act of reading.

Conclusion

While various approaches to teaching literature can help students study character and emotion, oral interpretation invites

students to explore and "do" the characters and emotions: "It is not, to begin with, a study of the experience but an engagement with it" (Bacon, 1986; p. 22). Coupled with exercises in reflection, oral interpretation activities usher students into the deep double game of reading that begins with this kind of engagement one of our students reported:

> Performance assures a higher concentration on the part of the performer--more of a commitment to the poem than there would have been without performance. You can't stray to other thoughts as easily--you work more closely to the words.

The deep double game begins with engagement. As oral interpreters, students begin to achieve one of the goals many of us hold for literature study, the act of learning about human experience through others' stories. Bacon (1986, p. 22) says of this process: "This sharing of self with other, this matching of self with other, is a profoundly human activity which in the richest sense of the word educates." Through explicit instruction in oral interpretation activities such as those we have explored, coupled with ongoing reflection, teachers can help readers not only learn about and sense "the other" but come to better understand themselves as readers and as learners.

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Appendix: Some Pragmatic Concerns

For the teacher unaccustomed to using oral interpretation in the context of an English or Language Arts class, these practical tips may prove helpful:

1 **SUPPORT:** Students who have not performed literature before typically need encouragement, support, positive reinforcement.

2 **REHEARSAL:** The rehearsal phase is the centerpiece for learning; students should be encouraged and guided to rehearse a text repeatedly over time in and out of class.

3 **WARMUPS:** Students will find warmup exercises like those described by Spolin in Improvisation for the Theater (1983) extremely helpful for loosening up the voice, the body, and inhibitions; and for preparing characters for performance.

4 **PROP OR COSTUME PIECE:** Students may find identification with character an easier task if they are asked to use a prop or costume piece as they perform their speakers.

5 **MEMORIZATION:** While memorization may be encouraged for performance, students may want to prepare notecards as prompts and decide on a classmate to serve as prompter from the audience. Frequent rehearsal with a text and a strong familiarity with it is more important for the beginning performer than memorization.

6 **PROCESS OVER PRODUCT:** Emphasis is on the process of identification with character and reflection on that process, not on dazzling products/performances.

7 **SMALL GROUPS:** Performing first for small groups of peers is generally less threatening for students.

8 **PEER FEEDBACK:** Students typically need instruction in ways to respond to each other's performances; guidelines and feedback sheets are generally helpful.

9 **SPEAKER AND AUTHOR:** Students often find a need to learn how to distinguish between the author and the narrator of a story, or the author and the speaker of a poem.

10 **POINT OF VIEW:** Because first person narrators are generally

characters in the stories they tell, they tend to provide beginning students of oral interpretation with more character clues for performance than do third person narrators who are less fully-defined characters.